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China's protracted securitization of Xinjiang: origins of a 'surveillance state'

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Xinjiang has recently been in the international spotlight due to the advent of what observers in the media and scholarly communities have described as a 'security', 'police', or 'surveillance' state (Rajagopalan 2018, Chin and Bürge 2017, Millward 2018). This refers to a conglomerate of security practices implemented by the Chinese authorities and mainly aimed at the Uyghur ethnic minority. These practices include the recruitment of tens of thousands of security forces to police the region (Zenz and Leibold 2017), the biometric profiling of residents for monitoring purposes (HRW 2017), and the establishment of camps where hundreds of thousands of Uyghur and other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities, like the Kazakhs, have been secluded and subjected to indoctrination, torture, solitary confinement, and other forms of abuse (Shih 2018). The emergence of a massive surveillance apparatus in Xinjiang, erected under the banner of fighting 'terrorism' and 'religious extremism', is associated with the post 9/11 Chinese state's framing of Xinjiang as a domestic front in the 'global war on terror'. The apparatus has been spurred on by recent developments including the promotion of Chen Quanguo to the position of Regional Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2016, or the declaration of a 'people's war' by his predecessor Zhang Chunxian in 2014. However, while the nature and extent of some of the present security practices may be novel, the 'surveillance state' of Xinjiang is far from a fresh development. It is the latest phase in a broader process of securitization (see Buzan et al. 1998) that predates the post-9/11 context. In this process, the Chinese state has constructed some Uyghur cultural and identity markers, particularly religion, as core threats to the unity and stability of the country.

To illustrate this argument, this article focuses on two key developments in the contemporary history of Xinjiang that help make sense of the 'surveillance state' as the culmination of a sustained security agenda aimed at tightening the grip of the Communist Party of China (CPC) on the region. The first is the abandonment of the moderate approach, known as *gradualism*, which characterized China's ethnic minority policies in the early years of the 'reform and opening up' (1980s). While displacing *gradualism*, the Chinese authorities framed Islam as a vehicle for separatism and a source of instability for Xinjiang. A second key development is the issuing in 1996 of the directive 'Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Document No. 7'. This set of instructions established a new security agenda for Xinjiang that defined the contours of much of the practices now observed in the region.

As I argue in the conclusion, the surveillance structure that infiltrates the lives of Uyghurs is the quasi-causal, natural evolution of these developments. It reveals an established decades-long pattern in the Chinese security agenda for Xinjiang aimed at intervening, disciplining, and re-engineering the Uyghur ethnic identity along

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assimilationist and secularising lines. The intensity of the securitization of Xinjiang, I conclude, is directly proportional to the increasingly stronger position of China in the international stage.

The shift from gradualism to securitization (1980s)

A starting point for contextualising the rise of the ‘surveillance state’ in Xinjiang was the onset of the 1980s, the early years of China’s ‘reform and opening up’ era (gaige kaifang). This period is significant for the moderate approach that the Chinese government adopted towards the ethnic minorities, which stands in stark contrast to the present context.

The background for this moderation lies in the CPC’s efforts to restore its credibility among Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic groups following the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Throughout the upheaval of this period, hundreds of mosques were closed, Qurans and other Islamic books were burnt, the Uyghur language was suppressed, and thousands of ethnic minority cadres, religious figures or intellectuals were purged (Bovingdon 2004, Millward 2007). These grievances, added to issues such as the large-scale migration of Han Chinese to Xinjiang since the region’s ‘peaceful liberation’ in 1949 and the nuclear tests at Lop Nor, damaged the CPC’s legitimacy amongst the ethnic minorities. Following the Cultural Revolution, looking for the stability that the economic reform demanded, the CPC endorsed a strategy of ‘selected toleration and guarded liberalization’ in Xinjiang (McMillen 1984: 579). This strategy, known as *gradualism*, involved a return to the Chinese government’s approach to the region in the early years of the PRC (1950s). Then, Beijing had prioritised the integration of the ethnic minorities over their assimilation, and the economic pragmatism over the ideological imperatives (Connor 1984). Some of the policies implemented these years were the incorporation of more ethnic minority cadres into the administration, a liberalisation of religion, and some degree of autonomy in cultural and language issues, measures all welcomed by the Uyghur population (McMillen 1982). The Chinese government decided to implement this agenda again in the early 1980s. The figures behind this decision were Hu Yaobang, a reformist convinced of the benefits of moderate policies towards the ethnic minorities (Dillon 2004: 35), and Wang Enmao, the veteran who served as CPC Secretary in Xinjiang (1952-1957) during the *gradualist* precedent.

With the renewed moderate approach, the 1980s witnessed a government-tolerated revival of Islam and other Uyghur identity markers, making this period a sort of ‘golden age’ for ethnic minorities. To correct the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese authorities encouraged the construction of new mosques. Between 1980 and 1981, Muslim communities in Xinjiang reclaimed or rebuilt over two-thirds of the mosques originally operating before 1966 (Bovingdon 2004: 33). The government also permitted the celebration of Islamic weddings, the opening of madrassas or the printing of Qurans and other Islamic books (Butterfield 1980, McMillen 1984). Another revitalized practice was that of the Hajj pilgrimage, with around 10,000 Uyghurs pilgrims travelling to Mecca between 1984 and 1990 (Gladney 1990, Xinhua 1990b). Today, under the ‘surveillance state’, Muslim customs, spaces or materials

are heavily scrutinized, if not directly forbidden or destroyed (cf. OnIslam.net 2011, RFA 2017b, Bitter Winter 2018).

Alongside the relaxation of religious controls, the government approved autonomy laws that opened up a revival of the Uyghur culture. These included the re-introduction of the Arabic-based script for the Uyghur language that replaced the previous pinyin alphabet that Uyghurs perceived as a sign of ‘Han chauvinism’ (Millward 2007: 236, McMillen 1984: 577). The Uyghur language expanded into many other spheres, including the judicial system, the media, and telecommunications (BBCMSAP 1984, Xinhua 1990a). Ethnic minorities also profited from preferential policies when accessing schools and universities. By the end of the 1980s, the Chinese state media claimed that ethnic minority education was ‘thriving’ in Xinjiang (Xinhua 1989a). In this environment, the Uyghur cultural identity blossomed. Uyghur scholars and authors studied the history of the Uyghurs, and published novels, poetry, and essays contributing to the emergence of a common Uyghur national identity (Rudelson 1997, Tursun 2008). During this period, Uyghurs also reclaimed the *meshrep*, a festival that combines music, dance, folk arts, drama, acrobatics, and oral literature, making it ‘the most important cultural carrier of Uyghur traditions’ (UNESCO 2010). A symbol of the liberalization of the 1980s, the *meshrep* was banned in the mid-1990s, illustrating the demise of the moderate policies and the increasing tensions in Xinjiang, epitomized by the Ghulja riots in 1997 (Dautcher 2004). Today, under the ‘surveillance state’, the Chinese authorities have arrested Uyghur artists, scholars, and even footballers, suspected of a lack of loyalty to China because of their affirmations of Uyghur identity, whether religious or not (RFA 2017c, 2018a, 2018b).

Finally, the presence of associations dedicated to promoting Uyghur rights (see Kumul 1998) and the student demonstrations in Xinjiang and some Chinese capitals also illustrate the relaxed environment. While not encouraging them, the Chinese authorities tolerated student demonstrations. In one of these protests, hundreds of Uyghur students marched from Tiananmen Square to the Zhongnanhai compound in Beijing in 1985. They demanded the end of the nuclear tests in the Lop Nor region, guaranteed autonomy for the Uyghurs, and the ethnic minorities’ exemption from the family planning policies (UPI 1985). Far from violently repressing the protests, the Chinese government opted for a peaceful dispersion of the students. Nowadays, the rights of freedom of association, assembly or demonstration are unthinkable in China more generally, let alone in Xinjiang.

The reversal of the accommodating policies in Xinjiang started at the end of the 1980s. The origins of the on-going, ever-increasing crackdown in the region can be traced back to this period. To a certain extent, the abandonment of *gradualism* only crystalized after the CPC purged one of its architects, Hu Yaobang, in 1987. Hu’s political demise allowed Wang Zhen, a former Xinjiang Military Commander and staunch supporter of a harder rule in the region, to push against the moderate ethnic policies (Dillon 2004: 36). Another driver for the abandonment of *gradualism* was the perception in the CPC that these policies had permitted an increasing ethno-nationalist feeling amongst Uyghurs. Looking at the protests, Uyghur students also supported democracy and human rights, or rejected the Chinese cultural influence or the distortion of Uyghur history and culture (Reuters 1988). Considering the religious dimension, the increasing economic exchanges with other Muslim countries had not

only revitalised the Islamic faith (Gladney 1990), but also allowed the penetration in Xinjiang of fundamentalist trends (Haider 2005). The combination of a stronger ethnic identity and a revived Muslim religiosity resonated negatively within the ranks of the CPC. A Han official supporting Wang Zhen's tightening of the rule in Xinjiang claimed, in reference to the Uyghurs, that 'you give them autonomy and they will only turn round and create an East Turkestan' (quoted in Dillon 2004: 36). By the end of the decade, Chinese leaders were framing Xinjiang as a source of instability and religion as a threat to the unity of China. In 1988, Wang Enmao warned that 'scum and traitors' in Xinjiang were 'hiding in dark corners engaging in conspiratorial activities to split the unity of the motherland' (quoted in Roche 1988).

The reversal of *gradualism* precipitated between 1988 and 1990. With riots in Tibet and the pro-democracy movement burgeoning nationwide before being crushed in Beijing, tensions rose in Xinjiang as moderate policies were abandoned. The events taking place in the Baren Township in April 1990 when weeks of protests against the closing of mosques and the family planning policies merged with elements of an organised dissidence of religious inspiration into a major violent incident were framed by Chinese officials as a 'counter-revolutionary rebellion' and a 'holy war' (Rodríguez-Merino 2018). Following the incident, the Chinese authorities tightened their control over Islam in Xinjiang. They investigated and purged hundreds of imams, closed more than 200 unregistered Islamic schools, and passed regulations aimed at controlling the clergy and restricting religious education and materials to the official channels (Fu 1992, AI 1992). By the turn of the decade, the Chinese government had identified religion as a source of separatism and dissent in Xinjiang, making it an emerging priority in the national security agenda.

Document No. 7: a security agenda for Xinjiang (1996)

The second crucial development towards the securitization of Xinjiang occurred during the 1990s when the Chinese authorities, building on the post-Baren *momentum*, issued a series of directives aimed at controlling religion nationwide. One of these documents, released in 1996 under the title *Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Document No. 7.*, addressed the situation in Xinjiang, and elevated 'national separatism and illegal religious activity' to the category of 'main threats to the stability' (CPC 1996: 10-18).

The original contours of the present 'surveillance state' are to be found in the agenda conveyed in *Document No. 7*. The directive called for the 'severe' control of mosques, the closure of 'underground religious schools', a higher scrutiny of religious students, and the exclusive management of religious activities by 'patriotic religious leaders' (CPC 1996: 11). To this aim, the circular ordered the establishment of a covert 'sensitive information network' in southern Xinjiang (CPC 1996: 12). *Document No. 7* also discouraged student exchanges and ordered the removal of religious and 'ethnic separatist' contents from textbooks, as well as the confiscation of materials that 'twisted' the official historiography of the region (CPC 1996: 12). Finally, the directive also called to relocate Han cadres in Xinjiang and 'import talented people' (CPC 1996: 11), mostly Han settlers, from the rest of China. This final element entailed a direct reversal of the policies of the 1980s when the

government had favoured the rehabilitation and integration of ethnic minority cadres into the CPC (Xinhua 1989b).

Following *Document No. 7*, the practice of Islam became either ‘patriotic’ or ‘illegal’. Many of the security practices that characterize the present ‘surveillance state’ can be directly traced back to the implementation of this directive. The control of religious venues and clerics, the persecution of the use of veils amongst women, or the intensification of the crackdown during the Ramadan period -all landmark anti-extremist policies in modern-day Xinjiang- were present in the second half of the 1990s (BBCMSAP 1997a, BBCMSAP 1997b, BBCMSAP 1999). Similarly, the persecution of government officials who either follow religion or do not show enough zeal in enforcing the security agenda has been constant over the years. Thus, a parallel can be drawn between the call made in 1996 to punish those officials ‘who lacked the strength to oppose illegal religious activities’ (BBCMSAP 1996) and the current pressures to reveal ‘two-faced’ Uyghur cadres and ‘clean them out’ (Reuters 2017). Also during the 1990s, the Chinese authorities focused their censorship efforts, not on monitoring the smartphones of the Uyghur people in search of ‘extremist’ content, as they do nowadays (Lam 2017), but in banning radio stations or confiscating magazines or cassettes (BBCMSAP 2000). Likewise, in their implementation of *Document No. 7*, the Chinese authorities brought their security agenda into the Uyghur homes, often targeted in inspections (BBCMSAP 1998). Nowadays, under the ‘surveillance state’, houses and residents are not only scrutinized with security cameras, but also profiled and disciplined according to their level or religiosity (Sun 2017). This scrutiny, coupled with the enforcement of religious restrictions, has precipitated some of the violent outbursts in the region (RFA 2013; Grammaticas 2013). Even the most draconian aspects of the ‘surveillance state’, such as the organization of mass meetings to confess political mistakes (RFA 2017a) can be traced back to the second half of the 1990s. Back then, the Chinese authorities organized meetings to lecture the Uyghur population against separatism, during which residents would hand over the names of relatives implicated in illegal activities (AFP 1997).

A final element included in *Document No. 7* can help explain the current pressure that Uyghurs face in some countries abroad. The directive called for a diplomatic campaign aimed at putting pressure on countries like Turkey or, Kazakhstan to ‘limit and weaken the activities of separatist forces inside their borders’ (CPC 1996: 13). For this task, the document pointed out, China was to impose its ‘political superiority’ over these nations. Alongside diplomatic means, the directive ordered the surveillance of the Uyghur diaspora (CPC 1996: 13). An immediate consequence of this campaign was the evolution of the Shanghai Five, conceived in 1996 as a mechanism to deepen the military trust (UN 1996) into a security cooperation mechanism used to repress local dissidences. By 2001, when the Shanghai Five evolved into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the group’s *leitmotif* had become ‘Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism’. For Uyghur communities outside China, this meant that during the second half of the 1990s, places like Almaty or Bishkek, traditionally safe havens for Uyghur cultural and political activities became risky spots sensitive under the influence of Chinese pressure. The first arrests of Uyghurs in Central Asian countries took place at this stage, some of them deported to China via extradition treaties signed under the umbrella of the SCO (Peuch 2001). The international agenda of *Document No. 7* reveals that the Chinese state practice of

pushing governments abroad to deport back Uyghur citizens, many of them in search of political asylum, has a long history. Today, countries like Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, or Malaysia, and more recently Egypt, have been added to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, or Pakistan in the list of ‘unsafe havens’ for Uyghurs outside China.

Conclusion

This article has examined earlier stages in the process of securitization and framing of Islam and the Uyghur ethnic minority as a ‘terrorist’ threat to the unity and stability of China. Two main conclusions can be drawn from this analysis. The first is that most of the security practices reported nowadays in Xinjiang have either been implemented for years, long before the Chinese government declared a ‘war on terrorism’, or are a direct evolution of past practices with new technological means. The origins of the ‘surveillance state’ therefore predate and transcend any terrorist threat with which the Chinese authorities justify their crackdown. The second conclusion is that Xinjiang has not always been under the state of emergency that enables the ‘surveillance state’. The moderate approach of the 1980s is the evidence that the CPC can and has acted in a different way in the region and towards the Uyghur ethnic minority. As a Xinjiang scholar recently put it, ‘it did not have to be this way’ (Smith Finley 2018).

Weighing up on the current situation, concerned scholars are wondering why the Chinese party-state has taken this course in Xinjiang (Cliff 2018), or why the international community remains silent about it, considering the ‘moral hazards’ involved (The Scholar Stage 2018). Concerning the first question, it is not possible to discern the ultimate reasons why different Chinese leaderships have opted to continue with the crackdown approach in Xinjiang. What is possible to affirm, at this stage, is that the Chinese government knows what it has done in Xinjiang and for how long it has been doing it, as the very explicit road map of *Document No. 7*, drafted in 1996, suggests. The replacement of a moderate policy that pleased the Uyghurs for a security crackdown that aggrieves them is a conscious decision, sustained in time. As Chinese officials have consistently put it, the campaign against separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism in Xinjiang has been a ‘long’ and ‘protracted’ one. This is a core tenet in the Chinese state security narratives. In 1990, after the Baren riot, the state media outlined that ‘the struggle against splittism’ would be ‘protracted, complicated and arduous’ (BBCMSAP 1990). Following the July 2009 riots, Urumqi mayor Jerla Isamudinhe announced a ‘fight against separatism now and for years to come’ (quoted in People’s Daily 2010). The ‘surveillance state’ is just another step, albeit a more drastic one, in this perennial ‘fight’.

Regarding the second question, the persistence of an emergency state in Xinjiang, one that has been accused of ‘crimes against humanity’ (Caster 2018) or a ‘formalized racism on the order of South African apartheid’ (Thum 2018), does not seem to make Beijing uncomfortable in the international arena. The intensity of the repression is directly proportional to the rising confidence of China in the international stage, reminiscent of the ‘political superiority’ forecasted in *Document No. 7*. The words of Zhu Weiqun, chairman of the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, illustrate this emboldened position. Zhu

recently claimed that China should ignore foreign pressure on human rights and disregard 'whatever the West says' in relation to its policy in Xinjiang or Tibet (quoted in Thomas 2014). As Beijing was becoming more involved in international affairs, Zhu emphasized that time was on China's side to win over Western opinion on the righteousness of the crackdown (ibid). What Zhu probably did not imagine in his analysis was that 'the West' would actually have no opinion on the matter. Western governments have so far remained silent on the matter, at least as silent as the Muslim-majority countries, so vocal when it comes to criticizing the situation of the Palestinians or the Rohingya peoples, but mute when it comes to denouncing the situation of the Uyghurs.

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